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ABSTRACT

Literacy in China is mainly concerned with illiteracy in rural areas. Therefore, reforming literacy education is largely a problem of how to eliminate rural literacy within the general framework of reform in contemporary China. From 1949 to 1988, the illiteracy rate among the population decreased from 80 percent to 20 percent. There are still about 230 million illiterate people among the total population, including 72 million between the ages of 15 to 40. Among the positive factors involved in literacy education in China are: that the peasants understand that production must rely on science and technology; rural living conditions are much improved; primary education is universalized; and there is a complete system of rural education in place. Among negative factors are that the majority of illiterates are disadvantaged; those who need literacy education live in remote places; some literacy educators have low morale; and in some places there are insufficient resources for literacy education. An ordered system for literacy education has been established. Social forces at work for literacy include the primary schools, the Youth League, and women's organizations. Learners are asked to not only learn the three Rs but also some practical skill. Among the kinds of literacy education are: spare time literacy education such as night schools, literacy study groups, and individualized training; a combination of spare-time and full-time education; and complete full-time study. The policy of control involves the state laying down general objectives and the local governments determining their own policies and methods. (CML)

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LITERACY LESSONS

INTERNATIONAL LITERACY YEAR

Reform in literacy education in China

by Wang Yianwei
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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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Literacy education in China is mainly concerned with illiteracy in rural areas; therefore reforming literacy education is largely a problem of how to eliminate rural illiteracy within the general framework of reform in contemporary China. The present article will approach the problem in two parts: first, a brief review of the past and an analysis of the present situation; second, reforms in literacy education.

A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE PAST AND AN ANALYSIS OF THE PRESENT SITUATION

The elimination of illiteracy is a fundamental national goal. Meanwhile it also represents a historical task to be accomplished first if China is going to improve her national quality, stimulate social development, and achieve socialist modernization. For many years, literacy education has developed steadily. From 1949 to 1988, the number of people who achieved literacy totaled 167 million, and the illiteracy rate among the total population decreased from more than 80% to the present 20%. About half of the administrative areas have universalized primary education and eliminated illiteracy among young and adult peasants. Post-literacy education and general education in all parts of the country have also shown similar development, causing significant increases in the educational levels of the peasants. According to related statistics, young and adult peasants have achieved the following educational levels: those with a middle school education or above,

more than 30%; those with a primary education, 50%; and illiterates or semi-illiterates, 18%. The old days in which the majority of the population was illiterate are gone forever. Many have been able to progress from illiterate peasants to educated labourers, and are now playing an active role in production.

Generally speaking, although China has made significant advances in literacy education, much remains to be done. There are still about 230 million illiterates among the total population, including 72 million between the ages of 15 to 40 – an age group that should comprise no illiterates, according to national stipulation. Moreover, this figure is increasing each year. The basic education of the rural population is far from adequate, and illiteracy has proved to be a great obstacle to the modernization of society in many ways. First, it hinders the universalization and application of modern science and technology. When machines, fertilizers and pesticides are used by illiterates, accidents frequently occur. Second, it blocks the development of a commercialized rural economy and the way to prosperity. Third, illiteracy impedes the implementation of national policies, such as those concerning family planning. For example, families which do not practice birth control are mostly illiterate couples. Fourth, it hampers spiritual enlightenment, i.e. illiteracy slows the changing of outmoded habits and customs and the rejection of superstitious ideas. Fifth, it delays the implementation of the legal system, as many illiterates are also terribly ignorant of the law. In short, the backwardness, ignorance and associated disadvantages commonly seen in the rural areas, are all closely related with illiteracy. Thus the elimination of rural illiteracy is still one of the most urgent and difficult tasks for China.

Before anything can be done to reform literacy education, it is perhaps necessary to take a closer look at the basic conditions and various factors involved in literacy education in China:

Positive factors

- Along with the development of the rural economy and the spread of modern science and technologies in rural areas, peasants have understood that production must rely on science and technology. Many of them have noted that 'technology leads to wealth' and that 'one must learn to read and write before learning to escape from poverty'. Peasants have shown much enthusiasm toward learning the three Rs and acquiring science and technology.
- Illiterates are becoming fewer among the population as a whole, as more and more people have received a certain degree of education. Therefore the forces needed for literacy education are greatly strengthened.
- The living conditions of the rural people are improved. Peasants in some poverty-stricken areas now have no problem obtaining food and clothing. This provides the material basis for their literacy education.
- Primary education is universalized to a wider extent, thus avoiding the emergence of many new illiterates.
- Literacy and adult education has had a foundation in rural areas for many years. There is a complete system of rural education, a group of experienced and professional administrators and a large number of teachers.

Negative factors

- The majority of all the targeted illiterates are in a disadvantaged position. In terms of sex, women comprise 70%; in terms of age, most illiterates are adults over 30 years of age. Since these people often have a home and family to attend to, they have limited time and energy, and are themselves an obstacle to literacy education.

- Literacy education in the more prosperous areas is almost complete. It is most needed now in the remote, mountainous and less developed areas, where the villages are scattered, traffic is less and communication with the outside world is lacking. Literacy education there is extremely difficult due to lack of material resources, teaching staff and funds.
- With the development of literacy education, some new psychological obstacles appear. People slacken their efforts as they think there are not many illiterates left. Some administrators and literacy workers have lost morale and are weary of difficulties.
- In some areas, literacy education is often hindered by lack of financial resources.

These various advantageous and disadvantageous factors are at play. Improving the situation, overcoming the difficulties and finding a way out, all depend on conscious effort and motivation by man. Only in this way can literacy education be advanced, even in the most difficult areas. However, if initiative and enthusiasm are lacking, the work will lag behind, even if the actual conditions are quite favourable. Therefore the best strategy is to rely on one's own efforts, make full use of the favourable conditions and eliminate the unfavourable factors. Here one key measure is to carry out reforms, to start out from reality, to study and discover feasible methods and approaches, and to form a new and valid management system, so as to advance the cause of literacy education.

The State Education Commission of China has listed literacy education as one of its most important agenda items. Various local governments have also become much more aware and have strengthened their leadership in literacy education. Reform in literacy education has been carried out throughout the country and has achieved some success. Some significant features of the reform have been the following:

The state lays down legislation concerning literacy education

At present, great efforts are being made to complete the legal system of China. Under these circumstances, it is quite appropriate to adopt legislation on literacy education. After thorough studies, the State Education Commission has therefore worked out regulations regarding literacy education, which were presented to and promulgated by the State Council in February 1988. The regulations point out that accepting literacy education is the due right and responsibility of each citizen. It has also marked out the related policies and criteria, staff and financial resources of literacy education, etc. Complementing the Law of Universalization of Nine Year Compulsory Education, this regulation is the guiding document for the reform of literacy education. Based on these nationwide regulations, regional regulations regarding literacy education have been or are being adopted in all provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions. Many grass-roots units have also prepared their own local rules and regulations. The issuing of the regulation enhances the importance of literacy education in all spheres of social life.

An ordered system for literacy education is established

According to the stipulations in the regulations regarding literacy education, a system of responsibility is established to organize and supervise literacy education. This is done in two ways: First, a system of responsibility is established in governments at all levels. Tasks of literacy education are listed in the agenda and are planned, organized, assessed and evaluated accordingly. These tasks are also listed as official objectives of the leading administrators to be accomplished during their stay in office. Second, at the grass-roots levels, contracts of responsibility are signed by grass-roots units, schools and teachers. Units at the grass-roots level assign literacy education tasks to each educational institution, school and teacher based on the contract signed. The contract specifies the number of participants to be trained within a certain period, rewards to the people involved, and methods of assessment and evaluation. This measure helps to motivate leaders, teachers and learners and overcomes the shortcoming of 'pooling', i.e. where one can always get one's share of the reward no matter how well or how badly one has contributed. It also helps abolish some attitudes which seek only the quantity but not the quality of literacy education. Practice has shown that the establishment of the responsibility system is a valid measure in the management of literacy education which suits the characteristics of China. Since this method can greatly raise the participation and graduation rates of literacy learners, it is now widely practiced.

Many varied social forces participate in literacy education

Literacy education is the cause of all the people and involves all spheres of social life. Therefore the active participation of all social forces is the most important guarantee of its success. The first important social force involved in rural literacy education is the rural primary

school. These schools undertake, apart from their usual work, tasks of literacy education to children and young people outside school, through night schools or various literacy groups. Some schools also assign their teachers and students to train women illiterates who live long distances from school. The second force is the Youth League, which often takes the lead in organizing literacy classes, reading activities and recreation for the young people. The third force is the women's organizations, which often arrange literacy classes or literacy study groups according to women's needs, and help them overcome various difficulties they meet during the learning process. In some areas, besides these three social forces, retired teachers, office workers and intellectuals working in other fields of life also contribute to literacy education by setting up private schools.

Advocating functional literacy

Efforts are being made in order that the learner is asked to master not only the three Rs, but also some useful and practical skill. In underdeveloped areas, special attention is paid to the integration of literacy education with activities that aim at improving the standard of living and daily life of poor peasants. Under the present development of a commercialized economy in rural areas, the functional literacy programmes represent a breakthrough in motivating peasants to participate. They correspond to the peasants' desire to see the immediate and direct effect of learning. To these peasants, if learning means just getting to know how to read and write, and no real and immediate need is met, then they will lack confidence and motivation, thinking that 'distant water cannot quench present thirst'.

Therefore, functional literacy education is now practiced in many places. In doing so, the key issue is to reform the old teaching materials and methods so that the new ones can best reflect the local characteristics.

Another approach is to add a certain amount of applied science and technology so as to increase the applicability of the materials. Moreover, efforts have been made in some areas to experiment with new teaching methodologies that suit the teaching of Chinese characters to adult learning.

Another experiment in functional literacy education is to combine literacy classes with the learning of practical skills – in special classes, so that the learner can learn at least one useful trade. Examples of such combinations are literacy and sewing, literacy and weaving, literacy and chicken-raising, etc. This kind of class is especially attractive to housewives and has achieved very good results.

Diverse forms of literacy education

This can be seen from the following typical examples. The first and most common one is spare-time literacy education, such as literacy night schools, literacy study groups and individualized training. Conducted during spare time, this form of education has great flexibility as it enables the peasants to have more training during periods their farmwork is slack, and less training when their work increases. The second form is to combine spare-time study with full-time study. This is usually conducted in the winter, when there is not much work to be done and the peasants can devote much of their day to full-time studies for two or three months running. When it is time for spring sowing, intensive study gives way to spare-time study. This also proves to be a very convenient and effective approach to literacy education. The third one is complete full-time study. The participants are basically semi-labourers among whom young women are the majority. This kind of class is not frequently seen, yet it always obtains good resuts, as the participants always complete their studies in a very short period of time.

As for the choice of which form of education is to be used, the grass-roots units enjoy full rights in running schools and organizing literacy education based on the conditions and the need of the locality.

Central control and local guidance

Owing to the uneven development of rural economy and education, the state adopts a two-fold policy toward literacy education: control from the macro-perspective but guide from the micro-perspective. This means that the state only lays down the general objectives and framework for literacy education in the whole country. It is up to the local governments to specify and determine their own policies and methods of literacy education according to local conditions. From the macro-perspective, the general objective of the state is to basically eliminate illiteracy by the end of the century. From the local perspective, classifications have been made and specific plans established for each category:

- areas that have basically eliminated illiteracy may go on to consolidate this work and undertake post-literacy education;
- areas that have universalized primary education may eliminate illiteracy by 1990;
- areas that have not yet universalized primary education and lack solid infrastructure may finish the task of literacy education by 1995;
- underdeveloped areas may finish literacy education by the end of the century, and very backward regions may prolong the process to a suitable extent.

In order to achieve the general objective and supervise the progress of literacy education in the whole country, since 1989 the state has proposed that 4 million people should become literate each year, this figure to be shared by all the local governments.

The strengthening of international cooperation and communication is also an important aspect in China's literacy education. The Chinese Government will respond to the International Literacy Year with a series of planned activities. This, it is hoped, will also help advance literacy education in China.

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The International Bureau of Education acknowledges with grateful thanks this contribution by Wang Yianwei and Li Jiyuan to the cause of Literacy. Mr Wang is responsible for the Secretariat of the Chinese Adult Education Association and Mr Li is a specialist in literacy education.

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